



## AUTHORITY AS PERCEIVED BY REPRESENTATIVES OF GENERATION Z

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**Abstract.** In this paper a consideration of authority and how Generation Z people define authority was presented. Numerous definitional approaches relating to authority can be found in the literature. The article presents concepts of authority. The aim of the article was to present the perception of authority figures by representatives of Generation Z. The article presents the results of a study conducted in the fourth quarter of 2022. 258 people took part in the study. The survey method, a questionnaire technique, was used in the study. The tool was a survey questionnaire, in which, in addition to closed questions, respondents were asked to write a short statement on the topic: “What does the word authority mean to me?”. This paper presents the results of the research on the open-ended question. The subject of the research was the definition of the notion of authority by representatives of Generation Z. The aim of the research was to find out the understanding of the notion of authority by Generation Z representatives. The main research problem was posed in the question: How does Generation Z define the concept of authority? The research results obtained indicate that, for Generation Z, an authority figure is, among other things, a person worthy of emulation, possessing certain values, a role model, a trustworthy person, one who impresses, inspires, is worthy of respect, endowed with recognition, etc. The analysis of the open-ended question leads to the conclusion that young people have their own authorities, persons worthy of imitation. They also have a need for role models. Therefore, it can be concluded that in modern times we are not dealing with a crisis of authorities, but with a change in their perception.

## AUTORYTET W ROZUMIENIU PRZEDSTAWICIELI POKOLENIA Z

**Słowa kluczowe:** autorytet, wartości, osoba znacząca, pokolenie Z

**Streszczenie.** W artykule podjęto rozważania dotyczące autorytetu i tego, jak osoby z pokolenia Z definiują autorytet. W literaturze przedmiotu można odnaleźć liczne ujęcia definicyjne odnoszące się do autorytetu. W tekście zaprezentowano koncepcje autorytetu. Celem artykułu było przedstawienie postrzegania autorytetów przez przedstawicieli pokolenia Z. W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań przeprowadzonych w czwartym kwartale 2022 r. W badaniu wzięło udział 258 osób. Realizując badanie, zastosowano metodę sondażu, technikę ankiety. Narzędziem był kwestionariusz ankiety, w którym oprócz pytań zamkniętych, poproszono respondentów o napisanie krótkiej wypowiedzi na temat: *Co oznacza dla mnie słowo „autorytet”?* W niniejszym opracowaniu przedstawiono wyniki badań dotyczących pytania otwartego. Przedmiotem prowadzonych badań było zdefiniowanie pojęcia *autorytet* przez przedstawicieli pokolenia Z, z kolei celem – poznanie rozumienia tego terminu przez przedstawicieli tej generacji. Główny problem badawczy został postawiony w pytaniu: *Jak przedstawiciele pokolenia Z definiują „autorytet”?* Uzyskane wyniki badań wskazują na fakt, że dla pokolenia Z osoba będąca autorytetem to osoba m.in. godna naśladowania, posiadająca określone wartości; wzorzec do naśladowania; osoba godna zaufania; taka, która imponuje, inspiruje; godna szacunku, obdarzona uznaniem itp. Analiza odpowiedzi na pytanie otwarte prowadzi do wniosków, że młodzi mają swoje autorytety, osoby godne naśladowania. Mają też potrzebę posiadania takich wzorów. Można zatem stwierdzić, że we współczesnych czasach nie dochodzi do kryzysu autorytetów, lecz że następuje zmiana ich postrzegania.

## Introduction

The world in which we currently live is characterized by accelerating changes. These are driven by socio-demographic transformations, technological progress, an increase in information, and the frequent emergence of random transformations. The attitudes induced by these changes are consumerist in nature. Society is focused on what is here and now, on easy access to all goods. Everyday life is marked by unlimited access to media and information, originating from various sources – some more credible than others. However, a question arises: are human relationships embedded in this daily reality? Iwona Wagner (2005) observes that in the contemporary world, there is a decline in family ties, a fascination with the Internet, and pervasive media violence. These escalating problems should be addressed in educational and upbringing programs. Significant figures, role

models, and authorities, or “individuals representing an acknowledged order, rules, and norms, possessing competencies, knowledge, and enjoying social recognition” (Wagner, 2005, p. 5), can play a special role in education.

The concept of *authority* is difficult to define. In the subject literature, there are various definitions of this concept. According to Anna Mikołajko, “considering the ways of understanding authority, we are dealing with a multitude of beliefs, research perspectives, and languages, a multitude that does not facilitate comparisons. The difficulty is further compounded by the fact that this term seems to be as elusive as the concepts of freedom, justice, good, and evil” (Mikołajko, 1991, p. 12, in: Przybylski, 2013, p. 63). Among the numerous definitions that can be found in the literature, I will begin my theoretical considerations with the one proposed by Kazimierz Sośnicki, who claims that “the main core of the term *authority* is a relationship between two people, in which one recognizes the will of the other, adapts to this will, submits to it, and even tries to anticipate it. In this case, the first has *authority*, the other is obedient to their *authority*” (Sośnicki, 1958, p. 29, in: Przybylski, 2013). Janusz Sztumski writes that “authority is a function of measurable, recognised and justified rational values of the superiority of a given person, institution, or work over other people, institutions, or works in a given environment” (Sztumski, 1980, p. 31; cf. Kata, 2021). Therefore, the basis for the existence of authority is the creation of an asymmetrical relationship in which the subject of action gains an advantage over the recipient of their influence. The subject gaining an advantage must possess certain characteristics, e.g., have knowledge, competence, adhere to certain norms and values. According to Ryszard Stach (1998, p. 28, in: Kata, 2021), “authority is the social recognition and respect attributed to a person, social group, or institution. The source of authority can be skills and knowledge, personal qualities, ways of acting and behaving in accordance with generally valued values”. On the other hand, according to Stanisław Jerמושzka (2010), authority is a relationship, and its essence is the influence of one entity (person) on other people. It can occur with the use of an object or social intermediary – such as knowledge, position, or institution. Authority is therefore a relationship between the individual recognised as an authority and the individual who is the recipient of the authority’s actions.

A person recognised as an authority represents specific norms and values accepted socially. It is always a relationship occurring between individuals, within which one person (or group) recognises the competencies, values, and norms of the other. Authority, a significant person, is treated as worthy of emulation,

a person who is trusted, respected, and sought to be imitated. Being an example, model, authority, or master for someone is not about consciously playing a specific social role, associated with a clear script and rules, but rather about fulfilling a role in the sense of performing a function (Olbrycht, 2014, p. 20).

Bożena Tuziak points out that in social sciences, the concept of authority can be understood in three ways: (1) **attributive**, when it comes to naming a characteristic (or a set of characteristics) of a person (institution) endowed with authority; we encounter this when persons or institutions, due to possessing certain competencies and adhering to values (such as courage, integrity, understanding, diligence, knowledge, competence, acting for the common good, etc.), are given social recognition and respect, (2) **relational**, when the aim is to define the relationship between the individual who has the characteristic of “being an authority” and the individual under the influence of the authority; the relational approach should be understood as a result of a one – or two-way interaction between two persons, groups, a person or a group, during which one side acquires tendencies to model their thinking, attitudes, or behaviour according to the patterns of thinking, attitudes, behaviour, represented by the other side, (3) **processual** (functional), when it comes to naming the process of the formation of a given social phenomenon; building authority requires a certain amount of time; in this approach, we can distinguish three stages of authority functioning: (1) emergence, the moment when the object of authority appears in the consciousness of the recipients and gains their trust, and the content proclaimed by it evokes respect and trust; (2) consolidation – associated with expanding and strengthening trust in the authority, which lasts as long as its characteristics (values) occupy a high position on the scale of values adopted by the people who are the recipients of the authority; (3) decline – manifests in the loss of trust and recognition; it begins when criticism and scepticism towards the authority increase (Tuziak, 2010, pp. 59-65).

The literature analysis conducted by Andrzej de Tchorzewski indicates that researchers of authority distinguish its different types: (1) substantive authority – distinguishing individuals with exceptional talents, skills, or special competencies, (2) moral authority – referring to individuals who gain respect for their behaviour in line with generally accepted values and ethical norms, and (3) formal authority – attributed to individuals holding some important function (de Tchorzewski, 2017). According to Marcińczyk (1991), authority can be treated as a characteristic, a social phenomenon, or a relationship. It can be said that the word *authority* itself is polysemous and difficult to define. Definitions

of authority contain constructions of words such as influence, leadership, recognition, subordination, knowledge, competencies, experience, values, norms, etc. Wagner in his theoretical considerations (2005, p. 51) cites Bandura's concept, according to which "the complexity of authority lies in the fact that two sides can be distinguished: (1) the side representing certain values (forms of thinking, behaviour, valuation, attitudes); (2) the side expressing recognition and subordination to the side representing specific values".

Authority is a model of competence, knowledge, a source of inspiration for others. Special importance can be attributed to authorities in education. Individuals who are authorities for students and pupils can be a source of information concerning the functioning of the individual in society, the norms and values they present, and their aspirations. A particular role can be attributed to teachers, who, by becoming an authority for students, create a unique interpersonal bond, become their leaders, and inspire their development (cf. Jagielska, 2021; Łukasik, 2021; Stańdo, Jagielska, Fechner, 2023). People who are authorities are models to emulate, masters, individuals who impress with their knowledge, competencies; they are leaders, charismatic individuals. They are people with whom the youth identify. It raises the question of whether, in the modern world, we are experiencing a crisis of authority or merely observing a transformation in its perception. Do the youth admire only people who appear in the media, are popular, have money, or are we dealing with traditional authorities (cf. Jagielska, 2021; Stańdo, Jagielska, Fechner, 2023)? The aim of this article is to attempt to answer the question of what the word *authority* means to representatives of Generation Z. In the subject literature, Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1995 and 2010. These are individuals who do not know a reality without access to the Internet and modern technologies; for them, the environment of functioning is not only the real world but also the virtual; they are online 24 hours a day (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz, Chomątowska, 2014).

## **Methodological assumptions of own research**

The subject of the conducted research was the authorities of Generation Z, with the aim of understanding and defining them from a personal, definitional perspective. The main research problem was posed in the question: *How does Generation Z define the concept of "authority"?*

The study was conducted using a survey method with a questionnaire technique (Babbie, 2013) in the fourth quarter of 2022. The selection of the sample

was convenient, that is, where the criterion for sample selection is the criterion of availability (Szreder, 2010). Respondents were invited to fill out an online form titled *Authorities of Generation Z*. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part contained closed questions about authority, and the second part was a free written statement (mini-essay) on the topic: *What does the word “authority” mean to me?* This article presents the responses in the form of mini-essays. Based on the conducted research, the most important categories concerning the concept of authority were identified. To illustrate the identified categories, statements from the respondents were cited, which were marked with the codes adopted in the analyses, taking into account the order of the analysed essays. This allowed for a coded description of the statements (e.g., S1, S2).

In the study, 258 individuals participated. Persons aged 18 years constituted 6% of the respondents, 19 years – 32%, 20 years – 24%, 21 years – 14%, 22 years – 9%, 23 years – 7%, 24 years – 4%, 25 years – 4%. Among the respondents, women made up 86%, men – 14%. 46% of respondents were from rural areas, 5% from towns up to 20,000 inhabitants, 10% from towns of 20,000 to 80,000 inhabitants, and 39% from cities over 100,000 inhabitants. The material status of the family was defined by 15% of respondents as very good, 46% as good, 33% as average, and bad and very bad were indicated by 6% of respondents. The participants were also asked about the media they use on a daily basis. Most frequently, they use the Internet – 99%, social media – 95%. Respondents also indicated books – 46%, television – 42%, radio – 31%. They also use internet television – 26%, streaming platforms – 27%, magazines – 12%. Popular forms also include podcasts and e-books.

## Research results and discussion

In the survey, respondents were asked about what the word *authority* means to them. Analysis of their statements indicates that an authority is a person worthy of emulation, a moral model, a person with specific values, inspiring action and development. It is a person who is distinguished by certain characteristics, presents specific values. A detailed compilation of the characteristics of a person being an authority is presented below:

- someone worthy of emulation / a role model / a moral exemplar,
- a person who inspires and impresses,
- a person enjoying respect / deserving of respect / commanding respect,
- a person of certain values, guided by them,

- an individual endowed with special recognition,
- someone who motivates to take action,
- a person arousing admiration,
- a person motivating self-improvement / development,
- a person with desirable traits or achievements,
- a person whose opinions are important to me,
- a trustworthy person,
- a person possessing charisma,
- someone who makes me want to be like them when I grow up,
- a model we would like to aspire to and against whom we compare ourselves and others,
- possessing life wisdom and sensibility,
- a source of safety and established principles,
- the best in a given field,
- worth following,
- possesses good qualities,
- a successful person,
- a person to model oneself after (for the values they uphold),
- a person from whom we take an example (their life and actions serve as a model for us),
- a person who is an inspiration,
- a person worth following,
- someone from whom one can learn/take an example,
- a moral backbone,
- someone whose attitude encourages action,
- a person possessing extensive knowledge and skills,
- something that guides us in life,
- a benchmark for values and behaviour,
- impresses with their attitude,
- wise and experienced,
- a beacon,
- a person whose attitude in difficult moments of trials and life experiences is uplifting and encourages perseverance,
- a person unwaveringly following their own path (professional, artistic, life) whose consistency can serve as inspiration or a model for others
- someone you can approach for advice, who is a support and a role model for us.

The respondents' statements were very inspiring, therefore a few of the more interesting responses will be presented in this study. As mentioned earlier, for young people, an authority means a personal model, a person possessing traits worthy of emulation: *it is a model of a person who has traits worthy of emulation, which in some way impress me, and I try to meet them* (S3). Another equally interesting definition is: *Authority means a person whose actions/way of thinking constitute a model to emulate, this model becomes a goal to which one wants to aspire* (S10). It can therefore be noted that synonyms for the concept of *authority* are: *personal model, paradigm*. Authority is a person possessing certain characteristics that impress the youth. These traits are so important to them that they become a goal to which they aspire – they are traits that the youth would themselves like to possess.

An authority is an individual who enjoys recognition: *authority is for me a kind of recognition, significance, possessing the trust of others* (S2). It is therefore a significant person who inspires trust in those under the influence of their actions.

People who are authorities inspire action: *authority refers to a person from whom I draw inspiration, who is a model for me* (S9). Thus, an authority is a model from which one can draw inspiration. Another statement reads: *For me, it is a person who inspires, motivates to action, evokes a kind of admiration (positive), which has nothing to do with envy, such as motivating for self-improvement* (S43). Therefore, an authority can play various roles, one of which is motivating or encouraging action. Another statement reads that *authority is a person who has earned, through their behaviour, knowledge, and attitude, to be treated as an expert in a particular field, while simultaneously not harming others. Such a person inspires subsequent generations to act in accordance with universal values (such as respect for human rights) and to defend those values* (S27). Therefore, a person who is an authority is distinguished by certain traits and has a specific competency profile (knowledge and skills) that inspires the youth. Further statements indicate that individuals endowed with authority are admirable, impress with their knowledge and expertise: *(it is – ed.) someone I admire because they are an expert in some field or fields, probably because they share the same values that I do or would like to aspire to. In this way, they help me develop myself, inspire me and I strive to be like that person, but in my own individual way* (S52). Therefore, an authority is a person who lives by certain values, which according to the youth are worthy of emulation. Their stance contributes to the development of the individual under the influence of the authority. The concept of *values* and *living by them* often appears in respondents' statements. Another trait



of authority is authenticity. This is evidenced by the statement: *Authority means being authentic in what you do and say. It's living by your values. It's a person or group that is a guide for others* (S72). Thus, the actions of people who are authorities are coherent. They manifest not only in words but also in deeds. Another statement reads: *Authority to me is not only a role model, but above all a treasure trove of values that we consider right, and behind it great kindness (not always, but looking further optimistically), the possibility of identification, drawing conclusions, and the opportunity to draw something from another person for personal development. However, I am aware that authority should be chosen wisely, one should also "keep one's eyes open", not lose one's own "self", but only strengthen and be inspired by the authority* (S113). These statements confirm that authority is most often a person worthy of emulation, adhering to certain values. Such a person motivates personal development and is a guide, a model to emulate for the respondents. Here are a few sample statements: *Authority means for me a kind of guide. It is a special and exceptional person whom I can emulate. It is thanks to them that I know how I should act and what to be guided by in life* (S59), or: *Authority for me is a person whose behaviour, skills, education, knowledge, manners, etc., constitute a kind of behavioural pattern. It is an image of the kind of person I would like to be and the skills I would like to acquire along the way to achieving the goal I have set for myself* (S167). A person who is an authority is treated with respect: *authority for me is a person whom I regard with extraordinary respect due to their achievements, which impress me; I usually try to implement some of the behaviours/attitudes to life/actions into my life* (S105). It is an individual one wants to emulate: *authority for me is a person whom I admire to the extent that I strive to be like them. Of course, on healthy terms. When I observe them, I do not feel envy but admiration* (S39).

The analysed statements present a certain image of individuals who serve as role models for the youth of Generation Z. They are people who possess specific traits, knowledge, skills, inspire trust, and are capable of creating relationships. It is important to note that during the study, only two individuals indicated that they do not have authorities in their lives.

Referring to Bożena Tuziak's concept (2010), the analysis of statements indicates that the young people belonging to Generation Z understand the concept of authority in two of the ways mentioned by the author: **attributive** and **relational**. A processual way of perceiving authority does not emerge from the statements. Respondents in their statements point to specific characteristics of authority, including adherence to values, competencies, respect, and recognition.

This way of perceiving is defined by Tuziak as attributive. In their statements, respondents indicate that they have their authorities, who are models for them to emulate, guides; they try in their actions and behaviour to emulate personal models. This type of defining authority is defined as relational.

## Conclusions

Definitions of authority indicate that being an authority means the ability to create an asymmetrical relationship in which the individual who is an authority has an advantage over the individual who is the recipient of their influence. Being an authority means impacting, influencing an individual; it is a specific property. People who are recognised as models to emulate, significant individuals, are those who possess certain traits – they are recognised, respected. Certainly, these are individuals who inspire trust, possess substantive knowledge (are experts in their field), competencies, and can motivate and encourage development, share knowledge and experience, build relationships. Many other characteristics can be listed. However, what is important is that research conducted among the youth of Generation Z indicates that having authority in their lives is important. Every generation has a need for authority. Contemporary times are marked by change, and this also affects the perception of authorities. What does not change is the characteristics of an authority. The research conducted on the perception of authority by the youth aligns with the research conducted by Magdalena Piorunek (2016). The perception of authority by the youth coincides with the definitions that have been present in the literature for many years. Changes occur in the choice of authorities.

It is also worth pointing out the role of authority in education. Young people highlight the need for having authorities, models to emulate. They need people who will inspire and motivate them for development. They need individuals who will be their guides, treasuries of values. Perhaps it is worth emphasising to students preparing for a teaching profession the important role a teacher plays in the lives of pupils. Preparing a teacher to work with pupils should focus not only on substantive knowledge but also on developing soft skills, teaching how to build relationships, talk and recognise students' strengths to guide them effectively and help in planning their educational and professional careers. Perhaps it is worth educating future teachers to be the kind of teacher about whom, as Maria Dudzikowa writes, students laugh with, rather than the type of teacher against whom students laugh (evoking fear, dread, hatred) or at whom they laugh

(focused on feigning power and unhappy due to its loss) (Dudzikowa, 1996). Maybe it is worth educating to create relationships because real education is based on them, and a relationship, trust, expertise, and openness build authority.

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